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Dilemmas of Social Integration in the Silesian Countryside

1.

The problem of social integration of a Silesian village has its roots in history and specifically in this region. Silesia belonged to the territory which separated from the Polish state a long time ago. Historically speaking, Silesia was a part of the Piast Poland in the early Middle Ages. However, the regional division dating from the times of Boleslaus Wrymouth, the mutual antagonisms among his sons and later the hereditary division of the Silesian lands resulted in the supreme authority being exercised over this region of Poland; first, by the Polish kings for almost 400 years, next by the Czech sovereigns for about 100 years and then by the Austrian rulers for about 250 years. The Prussian rule began in 1763. Summing up, Silesia was under Prussian-German rule for 182 years.

It is a historical and sociological phenomenon that Silesia preserved its cultural and regional identity which could be discovered in 1945 when Silesia returned to Poland. This process was possible thanks to integration which was an indispensable and recurrent phenomenon to the Silesian people beginning from the turn of the 13th century.

Integration was an existential concept in all historical stages for both an individual and the whole Silesian community which lived in ethnically and culturally foreign countries all the time. Thus, internal integration was always necessary to maintain the Silesian culture, the regional character and not to submit to the influence of foreign cultures.

Integration as a complex and multidimensional process took place in different areas of social life of the Silesian people, e.g. in the field of culture and cultural patterns, norms of action, the division of labour, the parts

and roles in a group according to the occupied social positions and the features of a social community as well as in interhuman communication, information, an exchange and behaviour in a group.

Viewed historically, the culture of the Silesian people always developed in a national foreign environment. It was perceived by other nations and states as lower, rural, plebeian, archaic both in form and content. Although it was a culture of a rural social class, it operated for its own social environment simultaneously thus allowing it to preserve and defend its own Silesian character.

Such values as work, the family, Catholic religion and the Church were the main integration factors in this culture and in all ethnic Silesian communities. The individual and social life of the Silesian people focused on these values.

Passing to the situation of the Silesian people after 1945, when the whole of Silesia returned to Poland as a result of the Potsdam Agreement, the attention should be paid to two facts which were unfavourable to integration with Poland. Firstly, the Silesian people (and especially Silesia of Opole) were not liberated by the Polish Army in 1945 but they regained freedom from the Soviet Army which administered Silesia from January to May 1945 (particularly Silesia of Opole). The Soviets through their military command did a lot of harm and injury to the Silesian people because they treated this territory and its inhabitants as German. Secondly, Silesia returned to the state which defined itself as a socialist country and thus as far as culture, religion and politics were concerned, it was alien to the autochthons.

The new socialist authority made some serious errors in a complex historical and social situation. One of them was the verification of the Silesian people who had to declare their Polish nationality if they wanted to remain in Silesia. The authority did not react to the robbery from the Silesian people, either. The autochthons were practically devoid of power and the Silesian people were treated with suspicion or even as socialist enemies. All these facts discouraged the Silesian people from the socialist authority right from the very beginning.

2.

The year 1945 is an important date for Silesia as a complex process of creating a new society from different classes began. Three main groups of people: the native Silesian people, the repatriates and the displaced persons were subjected to the process of integration in local communities. The number

of these groups varied in different periods. The autochthons (52.1% to 55.4%) were the most numerous population group in the years 1945—1948. The repatriates (22.2% to 27.3%) came second and the third place was occupied by the displaced persons (17.4% to 18.8%). A small group of re-emigrants from France and Belgium was the last.

Out of the total number 391.2 thousand people who came to Silesia 235.7 thousand people, that is over 60%, settled in the villages. Among the whole autochthon population that amounted to over 52% out of the total inhabitants in Silesia, the majority of the Silesian people lived in the villages.

The people who arrived in Silesia after 1945 displayed a low standard of national and historical consciousness. They needed time to understand that they had met the native Silesian people in Silesia and not the Germans. These native people (the autochthons) usually lived in the villages and they did not leave their households when the front line was crossed in 1945. Their life was connected with the degree of self-sufficiency which, in turn, was linked with work and life in a local rural community. The fact that the autochthons were engaged mainly in agriculture and craft caused that the Silesians identified with their separate and distinct group character. The Polish language used in Silesia betrayed peasants' or workers' origin.

A strong social bond which was based on such objective foundations as ethnic identity, territorial community, the feeling that you are at home, a particular social distance towards "foreigners", that is different settlement groups which came to Silesia, was typical of rural local communities immediately after 1945. A strong social bond among the Silesian people strengthened by cultural patterns which recommended good and effective work, led to the high civilization development of local communities. The Stalin's period (1949 to October 1956) did relatively slight harm to the Silesian rural people. It only resulted in their greater internal tightness.

3.

The wounds began to heal gradually after October, 1956. Owing to the process of social integration, cultural patterns favourable to community life and cooperation strengthened in a new generation of the Silesian people. Mixed marriages, common institutions of education and management had a positive influence on social integration among different settlement groups.

The process was seriously disturbed in the 1970s when the then authorities of the Polish People's Republic signed an agreement with the Government of the German Federal Republic in Helsinki. According to this agreement,

Germany gave Poland substantial credit and thus, as the Silesians say, a great number of inhabitants of Silesia were "sold". There was a wave of large immigration which weakened the local social structures and it also contributed to the second closure of the Silesian community. It should be pointed out that 33,395 people left the Silesian villages in Silesia of Opole in the years 1975—1983 and about 200 thousand people immigrated from Silesia. This phenomenon had a harmful influence on socio-occupational structure of the autochthon population especially in the villages. Generally speaking, external migration (mainly to West Germany) included almost all increase of the autochthon population from the years 1950—1985, and it produced lasting and irreversible biological, social, economic and moral effects on the structure of local rural communities and of the whole Silesian region.

The eventful years of the 1980s, martial law and serious economic crisis contributed to the loss of hope for a rapid change. These facts also caused that the Silesian people who were used to meticulous work and who cultivated efficient management and civilization development began to lose quickly their bond with the Polish state and to search simultaneously for some links with strong economically and socially West Germany.

The lack of hope for a quick change and the lack of perspectives for the development of a new generation speeded up the immigration to the Federal Republic of Germany. They also contributed to the search for the identification with the German nation and the German state. In this way, the movement of the autochthon population came into existence in Silesia in recent years. The autochthons recognized themselves as a German minority in Silesia.

4.

I believe that the processes which have taken place among the native population in Silesia recently can be interpreted with the help of the theory of a reference group. This theory explains a different point of view and self-evaluation of an individual according to the group norms and values in which one is situated. A reference group can be a group to which an individual belongs or an external group in relation to them. In the second case, the choice of a reference group external to a group in which an individual participates can be either praised or condemned by a participation group. The membership of the Silesian people in a given local community with its simultaneous searching for a reference group can be an example of such a situation.

The Silesian people did not find such attributes in a Polish socialist state after 1945 which could help them to identify themselves with the Polish People's Republic. Neither politics nor economy nor the methods of management were convincing arguments for their identification with the Polish state. We can distinguish at least three attitudes of the Silesian people towards a nation and a socialist state in the bygone years.

The first period which lasted from 1945—1956 could be defined as the time of wrongs and disappointment and a time of fear and closure in their own local communities.

Integration process on a large scale and in microstructures was typical of the second period from 1956 to 1980. However, this process was disturbed by inconsiderate political steps in the late 1970s. This, in turn, brought about a new wave of immigration to West Germany.

The third period after 1980 can be named as natural social disintegration of the Silesian people. As they were disappointed with the lack of life perspectives in Poland, they began to immigrate rapidly to the West and to create the minority structures with a distinct identity to a German nation as a global reference group.

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